

## **Malini Chib: The Acme of Feminine Disability**

**Geethu Vijayan**

University of Kerala

---

### **Abstract**

Disability is always being considered as the limited minority who are constantly suffering a lot among them females are the most cursed. They were so vulnerable to abuse and violence as they are not able to take care of themselves. A bird cannot fly up though it strives a lot to fly high without air, Malini Chib is the one who creates the atmosphere for the disabled who are intensely flying up in their life.

**Keywords-** Feminist Disability Studies, Feminism, Gender Roles, Stereotypes

A feminist disability approach fosters a complex understanding of the cultural history of femininity. Feminist disability theory addresses broad feminist concerns such as the unity of the category ‘woman’, the status of the lived body, the politics of appearance, the medicalisation of the body, privilege of normalcy, multiculturalism, the social construction of identity and commitment to integration. Disability is a concept like a gender that pervades all aspects of culture, its structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, historical communities and the shared human experiences of embodiment. Integrating disability into feminist theory is generative, broadening our collective inquires, questioning our assumptions and contributing to feminism’s intersectionality.

Societal attitudes towards persons with disability have changed from time to time due to the impact of various factors. Literature is the sum total of human experiences that possess literary merit and reflects real society. So literature is one of the factors that cause social change. Representations of disabled characters have always been found in literature, whether oral or written. Men with disabilities are often portrayed as wicked or evil but women with disabilities are hardly depicted. The representations of female disability had taken the form of

“female maladies,” hysteria and madness (Rigney 1978; Gilman 1985; Showalter 1985). Even in real life disabled men always have a possibility of getting a better life partner - in fact, a normal one - but disabled women are not allowed to be a wife or a girlfriend to a normal man. Females, in general, are objectified as the recipients of the gaze, but disabled women are often argued as the subject of ‘stare’ rather than gaze that is associated with an unreckonable appraisal. This tendency metaphorically or literally points to popular societal beliefs and cultural behaviour. The ideas and theories imparted by feminine disability studies have produced a visible change as well as literature while representing disabled women. The post-modern era witnessed the advent of many disabled female authors and activists whose life had become an astounding presence that laid the foundation for the transition of societal beliefs and attitudes towards differently-abled folk especially women.

In modern India, the attitudes towards the disabled are changing, becoming more sensitive and positive. This is getting reflected in literature for both children and adults. Traditionally, disability had not been treated sympathetically in Indian literature. In fact, disability studies did not have any place in Indian literature till the late nineteenth century. It was believed that the change in the researcher’s attitude towards disability is due to western influences. Finally in the twenty-first century, in vernacular as well as in English, disabled people are recognised as potentially useful members of society and is represented as such in the novel, short stories and other literary works.

Disabled women suffer a lot since they are considered lower than other women. The core characteristics of normative constructions of femininity being nurturing and caring, disabled women were side-lined because they were in need of care. This inversion reduced their status to lower than that of other women. Being powerless, isolated and anonymous, women with disabilities are prone to abuse and violence everywhere. Disabled women face denial of their rights at every level.

India, the time in the past as hesitant to give due recognition to disabled women. Disabled women occupy a marginalised position in Indian society based on their disability and also socio-cultural identities that separate them into categories constructed based on caste, class and residential position. Tireless efforts and hard works of some good hearts make possible a memorable position for the disabled in society. Famous feminist disability

activists like Anita Ghai, Nidhi Goya, Mithu Alur, Malini Chib and others gave light to the dark life of disabled women in Indian society.

Disability is in fact socially constructed rather than caused by impairment. This was conveyed again and again through the life and works of *One Little Finger* fame scholar, author and Indian human rights activist Malini Chib. Living a full life with a disability should be the norm for the disabled. Yet in some countries, disabled people fought for their rights to have a life of dreams and aspirations. This happened because they took aspirational role models of disabled people who have been told they can't when, of course, they can and in the end proved that they can do whatever so-called normal people can do. Malini Chib is one such role model. She overcame the hurdles to fly high. She inspires others with her miraculous achievements and her aptitude and resolution lead her to live a rich life with cerebral palsy. Malini is never thought of as being different, mainly because of her family's support, acceptance and encouraging attitude towards cerebral palsy, which in turn enabled her to grow up expecting nothing less than what she chooses. Having an uncompromising attitude towards her disability, she becomes a champion and role model to many others who face a similar dilemma. The presence of mind of Chib helps her to overcome the exclusions of society and attaining the right to contribute to all fields of human life like normal.

Malini Chib fought for a good life and the output was the glorious and victorious history of her life. Following a traumatic birth, Malini was not expected to survive. Though she was born Cerebral Palsic, Indian doctors did not give a trace of hope for her parents telling them that she will remain as a vegetable throughout her life. The family was so determined to save their child as they knew from her smile and eyes that Malini was bright and disability had not affected her brain. They didn't give up on her and look for all possible ways to give their child a better life and finally left for England in a quest for support.

Malini's parents knew from her smile and her eyes that Malini was bright and the disability had not affected her brain. So the family left for England in a quest for support, since India didn't give a trace of hope for their child. Living with a highly supportive and extended family created a perfect environment for Malini to grow, develop and go after her desires and goals. She remembers that being an only child she got a great deal of attention from her mother and aunt. They were always there for her, goading her on to succeed intellectually. Thus Malini was stimulated constantly. "My mother pushed me a great deal

and I followed her unquestionably,” says Malini (Chib 25). She was treated like any other person. The attitude of indifference towards a disabled person inspired her to stand against all the oddities in life.

Malini's role model was her mother Dr. Mithu Alur. When Malini commences fighting for the rights and recognition of the disabled in India, she again turned to her mother. Through identifying the lack of assistance and support in India for the disabled populace like her daughter, Dr. Alur became an early pioneer in the care and education of people living in India with neuromuscular and developmental disabilities. When their family came back to live in India, no school accepted Malini as a pupil. The social attitude towards her adversely affected her mother badly. “She became introspective with the situation. . . . It was then that the idea of setting up a model of a school-based on what she had experienced in England dawned on her” (Chib 17). Then she established 'The Centre for Special Education' at Colaba on 2 October 1973, providing both education and treatment facilities under one roof for the disabled. It began with just three children Malini Chib, Farhan Contracts and Imtiaz. As the subsequent founding chairperson of 'The Spastic Society of India' (SSI), Dr. Alur had created a framework for the acceptance and inclusion of people with disabilities in India. Dr. Alur set up the first model of 'The Spastic Society of India' in Mumbai in 1972. This was the first special school in India for children with multiple disabilities and become a very successful model of education for children with disabilities which spread out all over the country. In 1987, the SSI received the National Award for the “Best Voluntary Agency”.

Inclusion in society had always been a fierce passion for Malini. She had moved on the path laid by her mother. Being the co-chairperson of ADAPT (Able Disabled All People Together) she makes the organisation country's most powerful spokesman for the rights and needs of disabled folk. The services of SSI rechristened ADAPT in 2007 included assessment and diagnosis, therapy, counselling, inclusive education, skills training, job placement and home management programs for differently-abled children. Currently, ADAPT's paramedical educational, vocational and community services affect over 3000 children and 10,000 families in Mumbai. Joint efforts of mother and daughter opened the eyes of society and assist them to provide education and job opportunities for the disabled populace.

Malini Chib had her bachelor's degree from St. Xavier's College in Mumbai and double post-graduation in Gender Studies with a special focus on feminism and women with

disabilities from the University of London. Malini describes her studies as emotionally empowering, enabling her to accept her identity as a disabled woman and finally be proud of being one. She considered her disability as the constant companion that inspires her not to give up her goals. Being a differently-abled person was not at all a barrier for her in achieving her goals but to promote her virtues. But society's perceptions of disabled women and their eagerness to implement their perceived notions often depressed her tender mind. So she tirelessly fights for others like herself, to help them confront the prejudices of society and contribute their mite. This passion has not gone unnoticed. In 2011, the Indian Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment awarded Malini Chib with the National Award for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities.

Malini has enjoyed a chequered career over the years, though she was experiencing physical challenges that her colleagues don't encounter. Like others, she too has felt most accepted when she hasn't been marginalised or treated differently in her roles. Despite her degrees, she didn't get a job. But finally, she was employed. "I got the job(!)..... In good old India. Unbelievable" (Chib 184). She was appointed as an event manager at Oxford book store in Mumbai while carrying on her activism to empower disabled people in India. As she was succeeding in her career, she received a great deal of support from her friends and others for organising events and making calls.

The new job never blocked her passion for writing. It was then she produced her autobiography *One Little Finger* which was published in 2010, writing the book containing 50,000 words book over the course of two years, with just one finger, hints at the sheer grit and determination that lies within Malini. Malini commented on her book that writing it was a real achievement. Despite her garbled speech, she had a voice and an identity. She didn't stop writing with an autobiography but targeted electronic and print media to convey her views on 'inclusion in society for the disabled commoners. A few of them are: *Are You Alone; Where Is Your Helper?; Citizenship and the Links between the Different Models of Disability; Does She Take Sugar In Her Tea?; From Charity to Rights: A Cross-Cultural Perspective; I Maybe Different but Aren't We All?; Voices of People in Special Schools*, etcetera. What is most exciting and a major advantage about her job is that she can do it from wherever she is, as a lot of it is done online. That is in fact her strength. It is also exciting that

her work gives her the space to continue with her passion, not just writing but also giving talks at the Institute of Education and conducting courses there from time to time.

Her activism is directed towards earning disability rights. She not only succeeded in gaining rights but also in making society treat the disabled as equal to normal people. Malini's book has inspired an award-winning film *Margarita with a Straw*, with director Shonali Bose echoing Malini's quest. If inclusion is Malini's personal crusade, then she has achieved this in more ways than she may even realise. Through *One Little Finger* and *Margarita with a Straw*, Malini has been able to include those without disabilities in the world of those that do have a disability. Her dedication and perfection in organizing events make people rethink her that she has brains and can be numbered among intellectuals. This inspires her, that it is possible to change society to a certain extent. She brings in attitudinal changes through the ADAPT. The matter of rights of disabled people has taken centre stage all over the world. Disabled people today in the west are involved in the running of disability organizations. 'Nothing about us without us' is the current thinking all over the world (Chib 185). She had initially started it as a recreational club for people with disabilities and able-bodied people modelled on the PHAB club in England.

In India, the Persons with Disability Act was passed in 1995, making her ventures pass with flying colours. Later the club was developed into a major organization extending to about 16 states, as an abled body that always stood for keeping rights and protection for disabled people. Their tireless efforts resulted in a disabled-friendly environment in hospitals, multiplex cinema halls, shopping malls and amusement parks.

Being a disabled woman, Malini knew very well about the double marginalization that disabled women suffer. So she was always there giving awareness talks and also offering many novel programs blended with studies of feminist and disability theories which she called a new social model. These empowerment courses for differently-abled people were introduced with the aim of enabling them to understand the good practice of inclusion. According to Malini the most critical phase of feminist theory and practice is 'personal is political'. So for the purpose of getting collective action and change, it should be spoken in public in a political manner. Learning about the latest social model (rights-based) of disability and the changing approach to the treatment of disabled people helped her to accept her own challenging situations and to add those new objectives to ADAPT. Malini Chib now is an

Internationally known busy activist, writer and lecturer. She has a job at Oxford, works with ARG and is involved in her empowerment programs. She is a versatile genius, inscribed her brilliancy in almost all fields and become a role model to the whole populace. Thus she undoubtedly becomes an acme of feminine disability.

### **Works Cited**

- Abu- Habib, Lina “Women and Disability Don’t Mix: Double Discrimination and Disabled Women’s Rights”, *Gender & Development*, vol-3, 1995, pp.49-53.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/741921809>. 12 Dec 2019.
- Chib, Malini. *One Little Finger*. Sage Publications, 2012.
- Corker, Marian and Tom Shakespeare. *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*. Continuum, 2002.
- Davis, Lennard J. *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Hillyer, Barbara. *Feminism and Disability*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.
- Thomas, Rosemarie Garland. “Integrating- Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory”. *Feminist Disability Studies. NWSA Journal*, 2002.
- Thomas, Rosemarie Garland. “Feminist Disability Studies”. *Signs*, Vol. 30, No. 2, The University of Chicago Press, 2015, [www. JSTOR.org](http://www.JSTOR.org). 13 Aug. 2019